

Observations

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Observations

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Historical note: The action in the story takes place in between "Heroes" and "Parting Gifts".

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OBSERVATIONS by Evan Como

Two figures waged their war between the tracks of a freight yard. The, seemingly, younger of the two experienced little trouble with obstacles on the ground beneath him. He almost floated above the metal protuberances, the tail of his long coat danced behind him, accentuating the airborne attributes of his fighting style.

The prey stumbled backwards, exhaustion making him a sloppy opponent. Dawn held onto its perch just below the horizon and he prayed to a god not spoken to in eons to grant him prowess to meet the rising sun. The god wasn't listening, obviously. His assailant's blade came perilously close to splaying his guts with a broad swipe. Caught by surprise, he stepped away from the arcing motion. His own knife spilled out of his grasp to fall to the earth just beyond his attacker.

Demon faced demon. Each, with his own tactic, tried to determine the best offense to end a battle that had been raging since just before

midnight. Each could sense the fatigue in the other, as well as the fierce tenacity to be the only one to walk away from the brutal encounter.

The disarmed demon charged. His voice bellowed as he dove for his weapon. But, the disadvantage of the idiotic attempt proved his undoing. Halfway through the action he fell, silent; his cry cut short by the piercing of his vocal chords as a knife was driven with expert precision through the base of his neck.

Without time to spare, Angel determined the creature dead. He withdrew his blade as efficiently as he had placed it and, in continuous motion, pulled his coat close to his body, racing towards a shed he had noticed during the pause in fighting. Daylight nipped at the vampire's heels and he could feel the heat of its touch on his back. It seemed to shove at him and he dived off-balance into the shelter.

The dagger used on his adversary fell out of his hand and slid across the floor as he followed it in a slide of his own, inertia having taken control. As Angel slowed, he found himself panting--latent memories of once being mortal still caused his body to call upon such involuntary reflexes. A surging pain caught him by surprise and he suppressed a cry in agony. Hitting the ground so harshly further strained the rotator muscle that was already beginning to repair itself.

He reached for the blade, using the movement to stretch his angry muscle. Resting motionless before grasping it, he became suddenly aware that he was not alone. Angel closed his eyes and listened, attuning every supernatural sense to determine who or what was sharing the space with him. The stealth of the voyeur was commendable. Its movements were barely detectable as it stole from the building through a vent in the roof.

Safe, for the moment, Angel busied himself with thoughts on how to get home. The day had broken, pouring on strong through little crevices in the exterior of his shelter. There was no underground access from it and the nearest one, he remembered, was several yards south of him. A deepening rumble from the ground beneath him caught his attention. An approaching train just happened to be going in his direction.

Giving up on the attempt to sheath his filthy knife, Angel dropped the two pieces into his pockets and rose. The gravel he had traveled across left the fabric of his pants shredded across his thighs. He absently dusted what pebbles had imbedded themselves in his skin as he edged closer to the doorway. The engine roared past, swallowing the sunlight. Angel leapt out at it.

Timing was everything.

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Showered, but still fatigued and trying not to concentrate on his still-aching shoulder or yet another fight he had taken too perilously close to dawn, Angel could recognize the pattern that was developing. He still struggled on a daily basis over the loss of two people that he cared about.

First, there had been the definitive break-up with Buffy, his beloved. Her restrained resentment of the reasons behind their ultimate encounter had been difficult to forget about. Much of what he wanted to explain to her his obligation to her safety kept him from mentioning. All of the purpose he managed to find since moving to Los Angeles seemed to leave along with Buffy, stealing away in her wake. The irrevocable silence of her angry departure remained, like a permanent fixture, in his office.

Then, less than two weeks after losing Buffy, his associate Doyle died. The enigmatic half-demon had insinuated himself into Angel's loner life to become his closest friend and confidant. In such a short period of time, an intimacy had grown between them and the loss left him aching for the potential of the first true friendship he had ever experienced.

Both relationships were permanently severed. Grieving was too difficult and time-consuming so Angel used the best way he knew how to repress his sorrow. He fought too hard, too often and much too long. And, along the way, he also repressed the issue that his activities treaded more dangerously close to the suicidal.

He stepped into the foyer of his offices, not surprised that at almost 2 PM Cordelia was nowhere in sight. The amazing clutter of her desk drew him over to it. A crumb of chocolate rested near her calendar pad, drawing his attention to the bulbous personality of her scribble:

12:30--Lunch with Gerard

There were other notes, scrawled in the same distinctly feminine cursive of hers. They made little sense and he resigned himself to having to wait for her return. He brushed the chocolate into his waiting palm and disposed of it in the overflowing bin beside her desk. He mused that the trash had, probably, not been removed since the dearly departed Doyle did it last. The dusty residue of the wipe left a thin line across Angel's little finger so he reached to pull a tissue, only to realize that the box--with its matching residue--had been empty for quite some time.

A glimmer from across the room drew his attention away from housekeeping. He had never noticed the small mirror on the edge of Doyle's old desk focused at Cordy's. A bittersweet smile tinged Angel's lips as he reminisced about the odd relationship that formed between Cordelia and his friend. He had borne witness to their cat and mouse dynamic, never fully understanding just how or when their superficial bantering turned into true affection. He didn't doubt their feelings for one another but, somehow, it pleased him that Cordy was out to "Lunch with Gerard".

He explored his own feelings for Cordelia and realized that he had grown to like her immensely. She was messy, and loud. She could still be irritatingly annoying. All of that aside, Angel was comforted by her presence. He considered their relationship as rather familial while silently hoping for the continued failure of her acting career. The wish was added quickly to his long list of sins, although, the stress her presence generally caused seemed more part of his penitence than personal enjoyment.

"You waiting for me?"

Angel awkwardly stepped back from the desk. He had been so lost in his thoughts that Cordelia approached him without his slightest knowledge--a sign he had to sleep. It was an activity he rarely needed, or had time for, anymore.

He tried to disguise what must have looked to Cordelia like an intrusion of her privacy with his inquiry about her lunch date. When Cordy continued to eye him suspiciously, he knew his attempt to be thoughtful had failed.

"Nice. It was nice."

The sound of an opening door cut off Cordy's imminent scolding as she and Angel turned to watch Kate walk in. Angel's LAPD detective friend studied the two of them as she it latched behind her. She smiled cautiously, unsure of what she had interrupted from the expressions on their faces.

Angel was relieved.

Cordy watched her employer study the pretty blonde from head to toe, wondering how it was that Angel was able to look at any woman that way without coming off as insensitive or lewd. She discerned that he was observant in his own odd way. Three days from now he would be able to describe exactly what Kate was wearing without mentioning that she had either looked good or bad in the outfit. He didn't care about the aesthetics--just the details. It was sometimes difficult to be around someone who was so attractive and realize that physical temptation would never be an issue. She studied Kate's own once-over of her boss to determine if Kate was wired any differently.

"That guy I saw you with as I drove up is a cutie, Cordelia! Are you dating?" She waited expectantly for a reply to her enthusiastic observation.

Cordy began to answer, finding Angel's uncharacteristic attentiveness disturbing. "We've been doing coffee off and on for a couple weeks and now we're into lunch." She snidely added, "I hardly qualify THAT as dating," to close the topic. She dropped into her chair and began rummaging through her side drawer as she rudely ignored the two of them. When they left to speak privately in his office, Cordy flipped her calendar page to the next day and happily scribbled:

7:30 PM Dinner with Gerard

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Angel remained at the table of the busy restaurant as the couple he finished meeting with walked off, Cordelia in tow. "My friend's boyfriend does these goth raves..." is how Cordy's longwinded description began. In the end, Angel came away with the understanding that he was to be hired as part of a security detail for one of the events as a try-out. Somehow he managed to convince Cordy to accept just dinner for the introduction instead of a commission--or in addition to a commission--for the potential situation.

Angel had his doubts that anyone could talk as much as Cordelia prior to this meeting. He watched morsels of food spew from the man, Bobbo-- as the redhead referred to him, during the course of his

exuberant schpiel on his transient club venture. He had liked the contrast of Angel's dark features against a pale complexion. His imposing stature cinched the deal although the compliments made Angel wonder how much his actual experience had factored into the job. By sitting across the table from Bobbo, Angel avoided fending off both crumbs and, he mused, a roaming hand.

Bobbo and his girlfriend had been disappointed when Angel begged off from a night of barhopping. Fear for Cordelia's safety nagged at him until the thought of any type of improper suggestion on their part towards Cordy would place them at her mercy. As he rose from the table and made his exit by way of the bar, the probable scenario almost made him laugh aloud until the recognition of a presence caused him stop and turn sharply.

The young woman fell back onto her stool. In less than a heartbeat she was surrounded by the hulking figure of the being she had been studying from her vantage point. Fear overtook her in an instant and she held her breath, waiting for the encounter to begin.

"Why have you been following me?"

His voice was somehow different than she had imagined. She was expecting an accent, some trace of his Irish roots. His lips were close enough to her ear so that only she could detect the menace behind his query. She closed her eyes, focusing her senses to the vibration of his voice on the sliver of air that separated them.

She lied, "I don't know what you're talking about. You must have me mistaken..."

His body touched hers nowhere. Somehow, though, his aura pressed harder against her. She twisted the stool quickly and faced the shelves of liquor. When she opened her eyes, she snorted in amusement.

She could see the back of his hands--beautifully manicured nails, she noticed--and feel his intensity still boring down on her. But, the gold-flecked mirror in front of her remained void of his reflection. She downed her unfinished drink in one gulp and before the empty glass touched the counter, another had appeared before her. After grasping it, she wheeled slowly into her accuser's chest.

"I'm sure you don't want people to notice," she whispered. With a backwards nod of her head, she drew Angel's attention to the surface behind her.

His concentration dissolved when he realized his indiscretion. He had been careless--another sign of fatigue. He backed away from the woman, towards his initial direction of the exit. When she reached out, touching his forearm, he stopped and finally looked at her.

"What do you want from me?" He asked, his bravado replaced by surrender.

She led Angel with congenial flair towards an open table, away from the accusatory wall-length embellishment. Instead of the chair directly to her left, though, he had opted for the one facing her,

trying discreetly to break her hold. But, she ignored the gesture and pulled his arm across the miniature table towards her.

"I don't want anything from you, per se, " she began in a voice continentally refined. The solid feel of a muscle beneath his leather jacket distracted her for a moment. "I'm here to observe you." She took a sip of her drink with her other hand. "How did you know it was me?"

Angel scratched the tip of his nose with his index finger. "It's what I do." Seeing that she wasn't understanding the gist of the gesture, he added, "your pheromones..."

She had understood completely and given into her urge to absorb the way he, too, smelled. Again, an expectation of something else had been dispelled. The color blue came quickly to mind and she glanced at the fabric of her dark azure jacket, contemplating the connotation of a color and the word 'pheromones'.

"So, you're spying on me?" His tone wasn't especially harsh. He was perplexed, still at odds with himself for having been caught off-guard.

"Spying is a harsh term." She polished off the liquid in her glass and pensively chewed a piece of ice. "By the way, my name is Pilar." She smiled, fascinated by his discomfort.

"Well, Pilar. If you're watching me, you're spying on me. So the question is still 'why?'"

Pilar finally released Angel's arm, watching his face intently. She reached into her purse and retrieved a piece of paper, handing it to him with a fountain pen. In a hand-written Victorian script were written more than six dozen names under the heading: Southern California. She watched as his expression changed from recognition to confusion.

"Basically, I'm a member of The Watcher's Council. It is my role, as an Observer--slash--Historian to follow the subjects listed on that sheet and describe their whereabouts, the things they do, who they most often do them to, and any other pertinent information."

"I don't see my name on this list, though," Angel interjected, "so, still, why would you be following me?"

She took a sip of her drink and laughed sardonically. "Well, you see, Angel, just about the time I finally pick up the trail of one of my assignments you seem to be in the process of doing away with them. That's mostly what I've been observing. It makes my work much easier, of course. That list is growing shorter day by day."

Angel nodded as the X's through some of the names began to make more sense. A few of the names crossed out had been demons that he, himself, had been unable to locate. He pointed, "Ordrada. You weren't there when I took him out last night. How would you know he was dead?"

Pilar's forehead creased as she considered his comment. "You took his blade, the amulet of his clan?"

Angel shook his head. "There was no time. In the end, I was fighting against dawn as much as the demon."

"Interesting." She sipped at her drink, deep in thought. When Angel finished X'ing and dating a few more names, sliding the paper and pen back to her, she continued. "The reason your name isn't on the list? The Council is finally trying to put its antiquated ways of thinking behind them. You've been deemed 'off-limits' for the time being while they try and make sense of what, exactly, is going on. Portents, prophecy, history...a convergence of demon and human lore make you a wild card. You've already proven to be a sore spot and no one knows what to make of what it is, exactly, that you've done or what it is, exactly, that you're meant to do."

"You see, The Council has known for over a century that one day they would lose control of The Slayer. They didn't know how or when. They had no idea that they would lose control of two at the same time. So, they're trying to come out of the Dark Ages and learn from their mistakes. We watch and we wait." She paused to watch him consider her words.

His interest was piqued. "Wait? For what?"

Pilar looked the vampire squarely in the eyes, finding his company immensely enjoyable. She had watched him fight, brutally defeating his enemies. The soft-spoken 'man' who sat across from her was a dichotomy. So when she finally replied, "Few Slayers make it to age nineteen, Angel," his visible shiver from her callous remark touched her immeasurably. The rumors had, instead, been truth. His mystery intrigued her.

As she finished expressing her duties, Angel noticed how Pilar leaned forward over their table when their waitress passed behind her, depositing another drink. She had reacted the same way each time the waitress came near her--overly exaggerating her avoidance of potential contact.

He stared intensely at the waitress as she walked away, causing Pilar to break off the conversation to follow his gaze. "You know she's not human," he stated.

Pilar dropped her eyes to her drink. She toyed with the lime garnish pierced with precision through its center by a plastic swizzle stick shaped like a sword. "My gift," she replied, almost angry.

Angel nodded and thought about Pilar's occupation in the context of the revelation.

"You know, in Europe--and I don't know how long it's been since you've been back--demons don't blend in like this. It's so odd, here in America..." she trailed off and collected her thoughts. "Like you, for instance. You're part of the mainstream. You've started your own business and you've got normal clients. Granted, they've got some abnormal problems, but to look at you--touch you... You're real." As the waitress passed again, she lowered her voice. "She's real. It's just strange."

She had almost finished the ice in this fourth cocktail and Angel took that as a cue. He rose silently from his chair, the exceptional elegance of the movement complemented by his unnatural grace. "I'll

walk you out."

Pilar dropped the last piece of ice from her drink into her mouth after she stood. A sudden lightheadedness overcame her and she steadied herself with the chair's back until her equilibrium returned. Angel had already begun his exit and she hurried, wobbling after him. The brisk rush of the outside air unleashed a thought she was suppressing.

Angel waited impatiently for the valet to retrieve his car. He had hoped that Pilar would continue walking, but he sensed her waiting figure just outside of his peripheral vision. When he turned to tell her to stop following him, she attacked.

Pilar's arms wrapped seductively around Angel's neck and she pressed her body against him hungrily. Her lips quashed his objection as she searched his mouth with hers. The words he tried to form fought against her, adding to the thrill of the stolen kiss. His mouth was strong, moist--another expectation dissolved--as he finally pushed her off and stole away to the safety of his waiting vehicle.

A hand grabbed and jerked her arm roughly, eroding the enjoyment of her 'research'. "What do you think you're doing?" the man growled. His tone was condescending.

Pilar opened her eyes, angry that the moment had been snatched from her. "I'm doing my job." She finally handed her claim check to a nearby valet.

"How are you trying to do your job? By sleeping with the enemy?" He followed her closely.

She tried to ignore his invasion of her personal space, but no matter where she moved, he anticipated her. She ignored the thought that echoed faintly just beyond her comprehension. When she moved to take the driver's side, he cut her off and took the wheel, instead.

"When we get back," he continued, "I think I'll make a phone call. Won't they all be interested in the new way you've found to handle your duties?"

Pilar looked across the car at the face of her partner. She had been traveling with him for 6 years, but every day in Los Angeles made him more of a stranger to her. His eyes were wild, anger torqued his normally attractive features. She squinted, looking for some sign of how he'd grown older--become 37 in their time together. His face remained unlined. The hollows of his cheeks faded in and out under the regular spacing of passing street lamps.

"Oh, as if you've been doing your job the way you're supposed to," she replied venomously. His mouth twisted at her matching challenge and he fell silent. Pilar sighed deeply and turned her gaze outwards. She absently counted the cross streets on their journey home. Los Angeles was destroying them, she knew, and wondered how many streets they would have to pass to get back to the place they were.

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"...and so I figure coffee is the key. I mean, like, who really wants

to do anything after coffee? It's so non-committal. But, you find out a lot about the other person while you're doing the whole coffee thing. Like about their families, their educational backgrounds, their hopes and desires and stuff like that. Because over coffee, you have to talk. It's none of that googly-eyed 'oooooh, you look hot and I wanna jump your bones!' kinda vibe going on. It's jeans and whatever and 'wow, you're kinda smart or interesting' and stuff like that. You know what I mean?"

Angel sat behind his desk and counted the words in between the breaths that Cordy took. He nodded at her pause and she continued, completely oblivious to having lost him shortly after "I've decided that every guy starts out as a 10--true, bonafide demon and works his way down to number 1--total human status with each date!" The continuing dramatic execution of the countdown was maddening. His lack of actual rest from the night before didn't help his concentration any. Until he heard her say:

"...like you and Kate--this is your sixth date tonight, right?"

He blinked and focused. "We're not dating, Cordelia. It's not a date--it's a get-together for her cousin's promotion to detective." There was a throbbing behind his eyes and he welcomed the lowering position of the sun as the afternoon gave way to early evening. "Why do you keep thinking that we're dating?"

"Oh, puh-leeze! Don't give me that 'we're just platonic friends' routine. I know that you're not exactly a full-fledged contestant in The Game Of Life, here, but you've got needs. That much I remember! Unless those Oracles completely took everything away when Buffy left you for good Thanksgiving weekend."

Angel was shocked by Cordy's blatant assertion. That lost day with Buffy was a deeply personal subject that he found difficult to think about, let alone discuss. "This isn't about Buffy," he replied softly. "I don't need to date. That's all."

The pained expression on his face only served to rally Cordy forward on the topic. "So, you're telling me that Kate means nothing to you, that being with her doesn't make you want to be with her?"

"She's not my girlfriend, Cordelia. I don't want a girlfriend. I wasn't given a mission to go out and fulfill my personal desires. If that were the case, then I'd still be with Buffy. Period."

Cordy believed him, but she enjoyed fighting with him about it. She would catch the way his expression changed whenever Buffy entered his thoughts. "That one-true-love mojo that you've got working there--does Kate know about it?" The question in Angel's eyes made her continue, "because a woman will stand aside and wait for true love to pass. You've just got to let her know that it's really about you and not her. Kate strikes me as the type of person who needs to know it's not about her."

"You think she wants something more than just friendship?" He realized that he had never paused long enough to consider Kate might actually want something else. Their relationship was professionally comfortable with none of the passionate volatility that had been, even at the very first moment, there with Buffy.

Cordy rose to leave, pausing to glance out of his office window as sunset officially arrived. The days were growing longer as they approached spring. A melancholy swept over her that, in almost a year, she had seemed to fall back into pretty much the same life that she wanted to leave behind in Sunnydale. "You better start getting ready, maybe take a nap before you go out tonight cause you look like hell."

Even she could hear the bitterness in her voice and she glanced at Angel from the corner of her eye. He was either hurt by her tactless comment or lost in thoughts of Buffy--she wasn't sure which. A year had taught her much about herself, making her feel years older than her approaching 19th birthday. When had she learned to notice anyone else's feelings, she wondered? And, more importantly, when had she come to realize that anyone could include non-humans?

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Angel bit the tags from the new shirt he steamed while showering and laid them on the Pullman. As he drew the fabric over each of his arms, his body reminded him how worn down he still felt. The previous night's rest had offered little restoratively--guilt nagged at his subconscious over the physical encounter with Pilar.

The shirt hugged the contours of his broad shoulders. Its synthetic content adjusted itself to his torso with every slight movement. He left the cuffs undone and they draped away as he reached to slip each front button methodically into its slot. Trying to utilize the routine of the simple act to relax, the cool texture of the shirt only seemed to magnify his increasing discomfort, how tense he felt.

He clutched at his heart.

For a brief moment he imagined in amazing reality the pressure of Buffy's hands against his chest. The fabric of the shirt had been a barrier between his skin and the warmth of her palms. His body reacted violently to the sudden desire for her. He reached out for the basin to steady himself.

The glacial quality of the ceramic made him wince. He stepped away from the sink, arms wrapped tightly around his torso, and backed against the tile for support. His spine recoiled from the wall's own dank chill

Her arms reached between his and tightly around his waist. There was a tactile vividness to the episode, unlike anything he had ever experienced before. The memories were unbearable to be subjected to, but he couldn't bring himself to fight against the recall. She was the essence of everything warm--a comfort he had rarely known in over two centuries of either of his existences.

The memories broke as suddenly as they had occurred. Heavy sobs wracked his body as his thoughts of Buffy were replaced by thoughts of another woman. Pilar's kiss had been frigid, so lifeless despite her passion. The analogy of how his own kiss must have felt on Buffy's lips brought terror to him. "Kiss of Death" resounded in his mind while his hand involuntarily moved to his mouth. His fingertips felt no differently than the ceramic they had embraced, his lips much the same.

The buttons slipped easily from their casings as he tugged at the shirt. He tossed it across a chair as he moved to his bed, hoping that by removing the garment his torture would be relieved. Lowering himself, a sateen comforter enveloped him in anything but comfort.

He had, through the years since regaining his soul, learned to surround himself with items that emanated no warmth--avoiding those things that reminded him of the discrepancy his immortality created between the living world and his own. Everything was smooth, cool to the initial touch. His belongings reflected his state of being.

Warmth was life. Buffy was warmth, neither his to possess.

Buffy returned to him, pressing against his chest, no fabric obstructing her now. He could feel the heat from her skin as she pressed against him, pinning him down against the bed linens. Her lips brushed lightly across his neck. She kissed him languorously.

Her breath. Her mouth. Her skin. Her warmth.

Angel's body roiled as he endured each wave of desire for his imaginary lover. He dropped into a deepening sleep, free-falling into the hallucination of being with the young woman that he so ached for.

His skin recognized his own touch as he descended into the dream. He felt heat. That perception lingered in his subconscious as he willingly surrendered to the beckoning slumber. His body finally relaxed; reassured that their passionate devotion, somehow, had been there to shelter Buffy from the dismal reality of what he truly was.

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Cordy sighed. This was bliss. She looked great. Her date looked great. Dinner had been phenomenal. Best of all, she wasn't the least bit bored.

Her cellular phone rang. With dread, she excused herself and withdrew the device from her bag.

"What!" The word expelled sharply from her throat towards the intruder.

Angel's voice, as expected, was on the other end. "How's dinner going?"

Cordy could barely hear him above the noise in his background. She caught a piece of what had been, until then, her favorite song of the moment.

"Stop with the chit-chat, Angel." Her lowered voice did little to veil her irritation. "You're just not getting this whole sensitivity thing. Because, if you were, you wouldn't be calling me on my perfectly normal date, would you?" She paused, waiting for an apology that she knew he wasn't going to make. "You didn't call to see if my

date is going well or not. What do you really want?"

So, Cordy slipped into the passenger seat of the 720I, knowing that, somehow--some way, her date was already in the toilet waiting for the final flush. Gerard had been agreeable when she suggested they go dancing after dinner in order for her to meet up with Angel. But, dancing wasn't supposed to happen until date #7. This was #5--just dinner. And #6 would have included a movie.

This didn't bode well for her dating system. She eyed Gerard suspiciously--God, he was gorgeous! When he smiled at her, she realized how long she had been staring at him. Her optimism returning, she concluded that every plan had its initial bugs and there would just have to be a contingency that included Angel's interference in the future.

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The audience surrounded Kate, captivated by her animated explanation of a drug dealer's apprehension. Angel stood slightly behind her in the circle, watching as the drama unfolded, actually enjoying the saga. In the 20 minutes since beginning the tale, not one person left the expanding group. Officers who had been there with her at the arrest nodded affirmatively to each other during Kate's interpretation of the event. She was a natural storyteller.

Just as Kate completed the account, Angel looked up and caught sight of Cordelia. He stole away without notice, a spectator happily filling his place as Kate, egged on by her co-workers, began another enactment.

Cordelia's dark curls bounced furiously around her face. The crowd parted for her instinctively. She was beautiful, and she knew it. People were in awe of beauty and she used that knowledge to her advantage in social situations. She looked around for Angel without a second thought. No one would dare bump into her.

Angel met her near the bar. Cordy arrogantly welcomed the attention that they drew. They both were tall, extremely attractive and very well dressed. Cordy mused briefly how out-of-place they were among the throng of barely near-average patrons of the, obviously, cop bar.

"This had better be good!" She stood facing Angel with her hands on both hips. She watched him eye her head to toe in her usual manner. She knew she looked fabulous--Doyle would have complimented her in a heartbeat. When Angel's eyes returned from their journey up and down her frame, she huffed at him impatiently.

He glanced around before answering while making a mental note that black wasn't especially flattering on Cordelia. "Your date didn't come?"

Suddenly, Cordy felt 5 years old. She gave into her frustration and socked Angel's bicep. When he winced, she was content with the desired effect.

"I need you to find out if..." he stammered, "...if Kate... Well, if Kate likes me?"

Cordy softened as she watched him struggle with the request. Facial contortions tried to convey what he couldn't put into words--over the months working together she had come to understand just what most of them meant. She studied him and noticed that the afternoon's fatigue had been erased, replaced by uncertainty and that fear, always just below the surface, that he was on the verge of causing pain or death to someone who dared to get close to him.

"This isn't high school, Angel. Why don't you just ask her yourself?" She already knew the answer. Now he was the 5 year-old, painfully shy. "Alright. Where is she?"

He pointed to the crowd, Kate at its center. "Be discreet, OK?" His shoulders relaxed as he watched the crowd divide for Cordelia's passage.

She tossed up her hand with a pageant-queen flourish and called over her shoulder, "You know me..."

Her comment caused Angel to have second thoughts about enlisting Cordelia's help until the unmistakable scent of his stalker caught his attention. He cautiously turned, looking for her, suspicious of what else she might try.

Pilar eyed Cordy with great interest. "She's lovely," she remarked, drawing her finger tips through the ends of her auburn bob.

"I thought I told you to stop following me," Angel replied, exasperation replacing caution.

Pilar smiled wryly. "No," she began, "I think that's what you were going to say when I cut you off...Remember?"

His cheeks flushed, astonishing her. His obvious embarrassment over the physical contact amazed her. She began to touch his face, only to have her hand rapidly, violently, pinned to her side. She gasped.

The two vampires flanked Pilar, each with a grip on her and easy access to her bare neck. Even in human face their hostility was apparent; they made no attempt to hide it. And, just as apparent was the effect that their close proximity had on Pilar. She looked visibly ill.

Angel squared himself and met the confrontation. He was back to his area of expertise, looking forward to the challenge; however, the unfavorable circumstances of the encounter made him wary. More than likely, he weighed, the other vampires were just as loathe to draw attention to their true identities.

"We need to speak with you, privately." The male was just about Angel's height. An ill-fitting jacket covered hid the true proportions of his frame.

The female confirmed Angel's theory, "We're not here to hurt anyone." She fidgeted with the strap of her slip dress, drawing attention to the musculature of her toned upper body. "We just needed to get your attention."

As the male motioned with his head to the queasy human standing

between him and his partner, Angel considered them both for a moment. Satisfied with their story, he motioned towards an exit. Instantly the pair released their captive to disappear with Angel into the crowd.

An arm curved tightly around Pilar's waist as she began to fall. She was helped back into an empty chair still warm from having just been vacated. "Where'd he go?"

Her partner's voice did not have the soothing effect on her that it usually did. She fought back an increasing fear for his safety. He wanted the fight. She could tell--his anticipation rose almost visually from his skin.

"It's not your fight to have," she whispered, sipping from the glass of water that he placed before her. Looking into his eyes, she searched for some resemblance of the man she used to know so well. Time stood still, marked only by a sudden twitch of his brow. She reached out to calm it, merely to have him slip away too quickly from the caring gesture.

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The male and female stood side by side against Angel. There was activity all around them--moving cars, people walking back and forth from the club to take a smoke in the winter night air.

"I'm listening."

The female eyed Angel suspiciously, then leaned to whisper to her companion who begged her off with a backhanded wave. Their affection for one another was obvious. She wrapped her arms around him for support, although Angel had little doubt that she was probably the better fighter of the two if it came to it.

"It's been rumored that you have an audience with The Slayer." A car passed by, momentarily blinding him. He caught the end of a look on Angel's face that he didn't understand, and continued, "our friends have been disappearing--The Slayer has been slaughtering our kind with a vengeance. We've come to ask you to intervene for our lives."

Angel briefly thought back to Pilar's list, making a connection with what the male was saying. "The Slayer isn't in Los Angeles," Angel replied, trying to disguise his regret behind the remark. "I don't know what you think I can do for you."

The female studied her lover's face before turning to Angel. "We've changed our diets...you know. We're not a threat to humanity..."

"Anymore!"

The two vampires evaporated into a cloud of dust that clung momentarily to the dew before dissipating. In their place stood a man, immaculately attired, accessorized with a wooden stake in each of his hands. His chest raised and lowered rhythmically while he faced down his prey.

Angel was not impressed. He examined the attacker and found his

overconfidence repulsive--and, possibly, a weakness. To slay so publicly was a foolhardy act.

"And you would be?"

The sarcastic nature of Angel's remark caused the desired effect. The man opened his suit jacket and slid one of the stakes into an inside pocket to calm his rising anger, the action proving to Angel that his adversary was experienced enough to know to suppress his rage before engagement. Angel left his weapon hidden.

"I, dear Angelus, am The New Slayer." He bowed mockingly.

Anxiety surged through Angel. A cacophony of thoughts congregated in his mind that he tried to sort through quickly. "...by nineteen" echoed loudly. A pain wrenched through his silent heart. That dream had been too vivid. What if?

"Gerard, what are you doing out here?" Cordy walked up to Angel and her date suspiciously. 'That expression' on Angel's face worried her. When she noticed the wooden object in Gerard's hand, her concern deepened. "Oh, great! I knew it!" She kicked him hard in the calf.

"Cordelia, get back!" Angel called as Gerard swiped with his hand to slap her. The need to protect Cordelia dismissed his anguished thoughts. "He's The New Slayer!"

Cordy's evasive maneuver was skillful. When she rolled her shoulders back her face just missed the force of Gerard's attack. She shoved him during the follow through of the movement, proud of her offensive competence. She turned at Angel's touch. "He's not The Slayer," she replied incredulously. "My Mom said she saw Buffy in class today."

Angel's confusion made her add, "Oh, I forgot to tell you. My Mom decided to go back to college. Now that we're poor, she can get student grants and loans and stuff. That's pretty wild, huh?"

Angel pulled the prattling Cordelia along with him out of the path of Pilar's lunging body. He and Cordy watched the woman plummet onto the hood of one of the parked vehicles. Cordy sounded an expression of empathic agony.

"What's going on here?" Angel asked. He warily faced Gerard who was back on his feet, rage unrestrained.

Pilar moved towards Gerard but he evaded her when she reached for him. "Gerard, leave it!" she pleaded again. "This is not your fight!"

"Whose fight is it?" he seethed, never dropping his gaze from Angel. "Why am I here, then?"

"OK. OK. We have some splainin' here to do here, folks" Cordy called from behind the safety of Angel's size. She looked up at Angel and back at Pilar and Gerard, contempt for the situation apparent in the tone of her voice. "I mean, what makes you think you're The Slayer? You're not a girl..." her voice trailed off for a second. When she caught up with her thoughts she disgustedly added, "Hey, no fair! Not

only do I have to weed out demons, but I have to start wondering if I'm dating the same sex!"

Fuming, she stomped away. Angel took the opportunity to side into the parking lot, effectively taking Cordelia out of harm's way.

The move, however, placed Pilar just in front of Gerard as the two men turned to face one another. She took a deep breath for courage.

"Angel, remember when I told you that the Council has known for over a century that they'd lose The Slayer?" Angel's nod prompted her to continue. "Well, from that moment, they used the best sciences at their disposal to create a Slayer of their own. It took decades, countless failures, but then Gerard was finally born."

"But he's a guy?" Cordy stayed back as she interjected, still trying to confirm his gender.

Pilar glanced back at Gerard. "Science couldn't create a female Slayer. Destiny creates the true Slayer--like your Buffy." The look on Angel's face at the mention of her name again reconfirmed the stories of his love for the young female warrior. Her brow creased against a pang of jealousy. "When the Council lost control of Faith, and then Buffy, Gerard was called into service."

At the mention of his name, Gerard pushed Pilar aside and stepped into Angel. "And, so then the phone rang..." he said, mimicking Angel's previous sarcastic tone.

The two took at each other with blinding speed. Angel extricated his knife from its hiding place to cut at his opponent unmercifully, using supernatural dexterity to his advantage. Gerard met each attack with a counter attack. His roundhouse kick caught Angel just below the ribs; but, Angel grabbed hold of Gerard's ankle as they fell, coming to a stop only after denting the door of one of the lot's parked cars.

Gerard grasped Angel's coat by the lapels and drew them both up at the same time. The strength of his opponent was formidable, but Angel could see that it was practice--not instinct--that brought a routine quality to their fight. Plus, in the open like this, knowing Kate and so many of her co-workers, Angel didn't risk fighting to his advantage in true vampire persona.

When the opportunity arose, Angel scratched the tip of his blade across Gerard's temple deliberately. The scent of blood left him momentarily dazed until he was thrown back onto the seat of what turned out to be his own convertible.

The sound of upholstery being fiercely punctured returned Angel's attention back to the fight. Using the passenger seat for thrust, he propelled himself at Gerard, feet first. Unnaturally, he used the act to vault out of the vehicle. Gerard's bewilderment was the edge that he needed. He gripped Gerard's coat, swerving him back onto the car's trunk where he straddled him.

Gerard struggled under his opponent's overwhelming strength. His arms were useless pinned under Angel's knees and he watched, horror catching in his throat, as Angel drew his face down towards his own.

He thrashed, realizing too late, that he was defeating himself. Finally, he resigned himself to the coming death, relaxing as Angel's mouth met his flesh...

"Angel!" Cordy screamed, running over and tearing the vampire away from the motionless man. To her surprise, she arrived just in time to see Angel lick Gerard's head wound. Angel peeled away easily. She mirrored his steps as he backed away from Gerard, granting his opponent an opportunity to recover.

Pilar rushed to help her partner. The moonlight sparkled on tears streaming down her cheeks. Her anguished expression spoke volumes, and did not change even after she realized that Gerard had given up only the fight and not his life.

"Is that your new thing, Angel? You, literally, lick your opponents? Because all I have to say is that's nasty! Unbelievably gross and disgusting!"

The demon in Angel was not appeased. Vicious removal of his adversary's life force usually signaled an end to fighting. This skirmish offered an explanation, but little in the way of closure. He willed himself to calm down, focusing on Cordelia's ranting disturbed reaction to what she had just witnessed.

Pilar held onto the defeated Gerard. That her head was leaning on his chest was a gesture not lost on Angel. He spit at the ground. Cordelia moaned in disgust.

"You've known..." he said to Pilar compassionately.

She nodded her head to his cryptic comment. "In my position, I had access to the medical journals. When I first suspected," she looked up into Gerard's questioning face, "I looked for answers." She wiped her at her cheeks. "Unfortunately, I found them."

"What are you talking about," Cordy shook Angel for his attention while whispering in his ear.

He used a simple motion of his hand to quiet her. Pilar recognized the movement, the power behind such a simple gesture.

"Come, Gerard, we have to talk." Tenderly, she reached into his jacket and removed both the stake and the claim check from the inside pocket. She tossed the primitive weapon into the convertible without looking.

Angel ran his tongue across the back of his hand, trying to clear the taste in his mouth. "He's got some kind of demon in him," he finally answered to Cordy. "When they realized they couldn't create a supernatural human on their own, they probably tried to add any number of demon aspects to the recipe. I'd heard rumors about the experiments." He spit again, finally satisfied. "Looks like they succeeded."

Cordy began to ask another question, but the sound of Kate's laughter broke her train of thought. "Ummmmm, you know that question that you wanted me to ask?"

Angel watched the approaching Kate, suddenly remembering how the

evening had taken a nosedive. "Yeah..." he held an imaginary breath, expecting the worse for an answer.

"Well, I think you can rest easy, my man. She only likes you for your company."

"She told you that?" He waited for the answer, relieved that Kate had stopped to speak to a group of people going towards the entrance.

"I think she digs the mystery." Cordy walked over to the cockpit of the automobile and casually extracted the stake from the driver's seat. She raised it and its companion for inspection then dropped them onto the floor of the back seat. "But, I get the feeling she's trying to get her head straight. You make a good escort for these kinds of things." Satisfied with her cleanup, she leaned against the door, arms folded across her chest.

"You're leaving without saying goodbye?" Kate walked up to Angel and examined the jacket's bruised skin. The detective in her paused to consider the evidence, but she left her question unasked. "Hi, Cordy. I saw your date here."

Cordelia noticed Angel's uncomfortable facial expression as he prepared to lie, interrupting him with what turned out to be truth. "Yeah, what a loser he turned out to be. Angel was going to drop me off at home." She paused, expecting disappointment to show up in the smiling woman's face. Nothing. "But, he can come right back. I'm not far away."

Kate exhaled, her relief apparent. "Actually, I'm kind of glad you're leaving." Angel's wounded look made her realize how she sounded. "Not glad you're going away, just...well... I wanted to leave a couple hours ago, so we're cool."

Cordelia just didn't understand the whole Angel and Kate dynamic. They didn't do the boy-girl thing that she was good at. Gerard and Pilar were easy--two individuals who were just trying to do their jobs and fight their inner struggle against strong feelings for one another.

As Kate turned to join her departing friends, she and Angel did nothing other than wave and say "see ya." Cordelia expected them to kiss on the cheek, punch one another's arms, shake hands. Something. Her frustration suddenly gave way to clarity about the two of them. When she saw Angel and Kate together she saw two individuals who were just trying to avoid contact--physical, emotional, whatever. That was the basis of their companionship. Two people on the same road to absolute nothingness.

She also knew that she was freezing. Walking over to Angel, she shrugged his jacket away and put it on. His shirt caught her eye and she smoothed his arm to feel the fabric. He looked at her--something in his eyes...

"I'm cold. Drive me home," she demanded.

Angel returned her petulance with an affectionate grin. He reached into the pocket of the jacket and pulled out the ticket from it.

"Gotta get my keys."

The car's seat was moist from exposure the damp night air. Cordy drew the hem of the jacket down as far as she could as a barrier to the chilly vinyl. She buckled the belt across her lap and waited, touching a curl while glancing in the side mirror, cursing the humidity in the air. Looking up at the moon and sighing, for some unknown reason she thought about the navy dress she could have worn.

"Oh, well," Cordy spoke out loud. "Can't change history..." The ethereal heat of her breath drifted into the night sky, giving visual dimension to the irony of her words. She snuggled deeply into the jacket and waited impatiently for her chauffeur.

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